

INVITATION AND WARNING

by

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To
MY MOTHER
who did not live to see
the flowers.

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H: T.

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PILGRIM

I step from a land no eye has seen
To a land no hand may ever hold;
My name with the sea's cold tears is green,
My words are the wind's words graved in gold.

This scrip upon my back holds hearts
That saw their hero in a dream;
This staff is ward against the darts
That stiffen trout in silver stream.

So, pilgrim, continents I tread,
The cross-bones in my breast for rood,
Breaking the shepherd's dusty bread,
The brittle beech leaves in the wood.

MYSTIC NUMBERS

WELSH CHOIR

A bird sang to me out of Wales;
But, O man, the blood and the tears!
And the wild wild wailing in the hills,
And Caradoc's gore aflame on the moors.

A man spoke to me out of Wales
And the thin thin wind was in his voice;
Black thunder rolled in the bellowing vowels
And brought a drowned kingdom to my eyes.

Ten children sang to me out of Wales,
And the blood and the tears and the wind were there.
But the bright bird whistled: 'These little girls
Know the words, not the agony. They were not there!'

THE DYKE-BUILDER

On the seventh day the storm lay dead.
The god who built the dyke strolled out to see
Blind men, blind windows, widows and the daft,
And the cracked shore carpeted with gulls.

On the ninth day no sunset red
Daubed the damp stubble: peacock-blue, bright harmony
Of gold and purple laced the sky, and soft,
Ripe as a plum with joy danced the quick girls.

But on the eleventh day the dead
Looked from their priest-holes, seeing only sea,
And the green shark-cradles with their swift
Cruel fingers setting the ocean's curls.

OLD WELSH SONG

I take with me where I go
A pen and a golden bowl;
Poet and beggar step in my shoes,
Or a prince in a purple shawl.

I bring with me when I return
To the house that my father's hands made,
A crooning bird on a crystal bough,
And O, a sad, sad word!

POEM

Oh, God, your blood swings in my heart,
Your breath sweeps through my breast;
My love flames upward like a torch,
Link-bearer to your feast.

Oh, man, your word rides on my tongue
To praise this lovely land—
But must my shade lie cruciform,
This thorn pierce my thin hand?

POEM

Oh, little child, see how the flower
You plucked bleeds on the iron ground;
Bend down, your ears may catch its voice,
A passionless low sobbing sound.

Oh, man, put up your sword and see
The brother that you did to death;
There is no hatred in his eye,
No curses crackle in his breath.

Walk through the world, you men, with me
As far as faith's far parish bounds;
Oh, brothers, fear not these great beasts,
Who are but God's own testing-hounds.

WHAT THING AFFRIGHTS YOU . . .

What thing affrights you, lovely ghosts,
And why those staring eyes?
Is it a terror I may know
That starts those rending sighs?

‘Young man, young man, we know your face,
We know the touch of your hand.’
What is it, brother, that brings you pain,
I’ll crush it with that hand.

‘It is no horror with heart for your prayer
Nor beast with blood for your sword.’
What is it comrade, my soul is yours?
‘It is your own dark word.’

THROUGH THE DARK VALLEY . . .

Through the dark valley that I tread
In my hempen robe with staff for sword,
I see death's buds on every bough,
And smell decay in the raven's word.

Beneath each stone I know old lips
Are waiting to mock as I make my way;
Each stream will spawn a thousand snakes
To fondle my thighs as I kneel to pray.

But one thing keeps my head from harm,
Though cross upon my breast should flame,
Or knife should cut me to the heart—
The simple knowledge of a name.

THE THREE HOUSES

Three flowers I tend in the house of faith,
The white, the gold and the red;
Speaking the spell through a silver horn
That shall bring a princess to my bed.

In death's grim house I act a prayer,
From the red-rimmed chalice drain a toast
To the white-lipped guardians I hear in the air,
And my father's gentle ghost.

In the house of love I name a name,
The candle starts to hear my voice.
But it's not with fear that my heart leaps when
I lift the latch and meet her eyes.

THE HOUSE OF TRUTH

Love has no limits like the year,
Nor like the word depends on breath;
Desire is started by a tear,
And Passion dances after Death.

All, all is truth for who dare seek,
And seeking, never fear to find;
From dreams a splendid house they make
Build solid on the shifting wind.

The knife that purifies the heart
Leaves soldier bleaching in the sand;
And rains that rot the future's bread
Make sweet the gardens of the mind.

POEM

I dropped the crock of my love across the years,
Over the hills of joy, the woods of woe,
Over the sibilant seas that sang of death,
The deep unfathomed canyons of despair.

I spilled the oil of my wonder, spilled my tears,
Through the clouds of dismay: I watched them go,
Trailing like phantoms across the heath,
Where the three old men knelt, sad in prayer.

And I came at the end of the road of my life
To a hill and a throng and a man on a tree,
And I saw the gold boy I had gōt in my dream
Rise and come forward, with faith in his eyes.

TALE

There was a tale told on a winter's night,
Deep in the forest where never soul dared,
How the hanging man from the tree came down
And skipped in a polka with an old goat-herd.

And they say, they say, as the crisp logs crack,
'When Jack Frost comes, the ground is hard
For poor bare feet, and the wind too sharp
To dance in the woods with a wounded side.'

POEM

I made a cloak of music from my dreams,
Gilt-thread for joy, and jet for years of sin,
Brodered the edges with the lace of love,
Softened to grey with tears no eye could hold.

And with this cloak about me, over streams
That led to Heaven's hills, I ran,
Crying aloud my father's name. His dove
Dropped from the boughs of Paradise. Unfurled,

The wings of wisdom warned me; many times
Harsh blows upon my heart bade me begone.
Yet thrust I sunward, till at close of eve,
I saw my father—nailed across the world.

THE CHARACTERS

The man in the mask swings a sword of bright stars,
The cloud of his breath is the shroud of the earth.
But the man in the robe from a book reads our fears,
And ticks off the minutes from death until birth.

The woman in white is the mother of hope,
And the twin doves of peace rest on her twin breasts.
But the woman in black, with a knife and a rope,
Is the watcher at gateway, the guardian of ghosts.

SONG

The song that the old woman sings in the lane
Is the song of the girl with the golden hair,
Of the gaunt old man who danced in the rain,
And the soldiers who ran from his eyes in fear.

And the song skips on, how the lass and the man
Lived in the woods with roots for their meat:
Friendly to fox, they laughed as they ran
Over the hills, the stars their loot.

But the tale ends, how in the full of their pride
The goose-girl woke from her tinkling dreams,
To find the man dead with a sword in his side,
And his beautiful brow gashed with three sharp thorns.

BALLET

In a world of black velvet
The pale figure leaps
With a lath in his hand, while trumpet
With icicle-fingers slips
The bolts of the heart and enters the room,
Proving to man that life is a dream
And the man and the lath are things of the world,
That the black velvet stays when the tale has been told.

In a shroud of white cotton
The pale figure lies
With a bead in her hand. The beaten
Earth tingles with feet of the wise
Who this day have sung for a soul that has fled
To the mansion they builded to house the wise dead.
But men without wisdom are muttering now:
'Which trumpet will warn us, and where shall we go?'

THE TWO SOULS

The widowed soul sat staring through her hands,
Robed in no raiment but despair's thin shroud,
Garbed in no garment but mad grief's green shade,
And the apples of her love lying rotten on the ground,
And the long green-grief song moaning round the home.

The solitary soul no mate had ever met,
Walked in the talking shadow of the wood,
Heard with her wise virginity the voice
Of children from the barren bough of plum,
And felt the brittle twig snap pointed in her side.

POEM

End and beginning are two wise words,
Two ways the wind blows in one breath;
Coming and going are movements both
That swing the door and bend the boards.

Four hands show weakness, stumble tongues;
Both heads are bare, the eyes are dim.
'Oh, the life of things is a difficult dream':
Two puzzled hearts croon fearful song.

Starting and finishing are two known ways
Of moving and halting, waking from sleep
To the land where blind watch lame men leap:
Two ways the leaf wags in the trees.

PASTORAL

I have learnt nothing from the marble urn
That sparrow could not teach me. Overhead,
The same cloud loiters that has loitered through
A thousand poets' summer dreams.

'I have seen nothing new,' says marble urn,
'Since I was made. Alas, the many dead
Are more, but that is all. Above, below,
The same clouds, the same streams.'

CITY

Abrupt, unfluid as an eagle's love,
Stone's frozen tumult rears itself from fields,
Housing from germ to worm the flower of faith,
The pock-patched beggar and the marble saint.

Here, Christ and Judas walk upon the stream,
The strict stone river, in their hosts;
Hard as a pauper's prayer, the stone tree shades
From tempest the unprofitable birds.

Here, the stern moment hides above the cloud,
Strange music shocks the hand of carven men
Who knew no symphony but song of stone:
'How will destruction fall,' they beg, 'how death?'

But, shut from terror and the toppling plinth,
Drugged with the dream of plover's scream on hills,
Two lovers stand, and from reaction's hand
Scatter humanity across the park.

THE GHOSTS

Through the plumed valley of despair come riding ghosts,
Their dripping lanterns swinging down my dreams,
Guests of the broken heaven in my heart,
Draping with dog-rose coffins that I carved
For other heroes than my dram-slain self.

Out of my breast breaks penance, like a sigh
Lost in a silent room of dust, where dead
Hands are clasped in memory, and clock
Only in vision knows again the voice
That spoke a music over half the world.

But dreams and deeds, head, heart, and hands
Tenant a tower of brilliants that flash
Yet never burn. The dog before the gate
Digs pleasure from his hide, forgets to watch—
And so the ghosts ride howling to my door.

THE WARRIOR BARDS

So they came riding
In red and in gold,
With laughter and harping,
Over the wold.

No sword was among them,
They fought with a song,
Safe in their kingdom,
The children of Spring.

Only their falcons
That watched from above
Knew the grey tokens
And heard the black hoof.

And so broke the battle.
I watched their gay dead
Ride the gaunt cattle
Back through the wood.

HORROR

Like the fey goose-girl in the enchanted wood,
Whose cloth-of-gold hair curtained her swart sin
So that the feckless linnets stricken by her flute
For homage' sake forgot the bodkin bright,
And so lay waxen in among the moss
About her feet.

Like the gold boy, the weeping pauper prince
Prisoned in a tower of tongues and eyes,
Stumbling from floor to dusty screaming floor,
Upstairs and down stone stairs, whose flaking edge
Is brown with brother's blood. And brother's song
Shrill in his ears.

Like the old traveller, who knew this stormy road
Even before the raven sowed its elms,
Who comes by night upon a lighted house
Where no house was in any other year,
And stops, aghast, to see his own shade propped
Stiff at the board.

RUSTIC CHARM

Wish in the well, at the lane's crooked limb,
Where the golden stoat his arabesque
Of evil weaves, with hare-paw charm:
That the sun-dappled apple tree fling her fruit
With the crystal-crash of the catkin-bomb,
And that where they fall five maids unmask
The hurrying heart that keeps them warm,
And five thin shifts slip to their feet.

DRAMATIC INTERLUDE

But more than the death of a dream, the prince now stark
in a sty,
And the hunters after truffles tearing the parquet floor;
More than that, the red lips raped by the shepherd's bread
And the banners scaring away the crows; yes, more than
all,
Is the sad stone room and the worm-pocked board, the
spider's husk
Tinkling as truant winds play hide-and-seek in rafters;
And the wild old man (his wife laid-out in the house in the
wood)
Scratching the walls for gold, his dusty bread forgot,
Ransom for scriptural shades that glare from the ash
Of his grey fire, muttering alone, bidding arise
And walk again in beauty his pale mate. None
Hears him, knows him, but the rat hid in the thatch.

THE LYING WORD

Truth and lie by lip and tooth
Chase the face of every world;
Proud behind the probing eye
Is dream that throat throws out as word.
The ghost that jumps from dancing jaws,
Festive as creature crouched in a flower,
Pricks his tracks in plastic time,
For a future that fails with the falling hour.

Present and past pace in a vowel,
A consonant brings birth or death;
From womb to tomb is a letter's length
Where Capricorn can belt the earth.
Mouth's cavern mothers a brood of bright rats;
An alphabet of peace the tongue
Shapes to a shuddering treachery,
A carol with a death-bell clang.

The dead who died but yesterday,
The dead who yet dare to be born,
Know, and shall know this golden sword
That swings from the stump of the healing thorn.
But who can save us, who shall master
This mumming mould behind the mask?
The foetal fact that a gesture gags?
O what is this wind-shape word, this husk?

HOW SWEET ARE THE FLUTES!

How sweet are the flutes, whose mellow notes
Travel together through flower-flecked fields,
Husband and wife; Question and Answer
Harnessed in harmony, waking old worlds.

Swift snakes of sound, fresh with desire,
They slide through the thickets Time has let slay
The proud palace garden that clamoured with colour,
To strike the low windows blind in bright day.

They pierce the high hedges, writhe over walls,
To the room where the lady waits, white with love;
They redden her lips and put pearls in her hair,
And leave the heart fluttering quick as a dove.

O sweet are the flutes! Their maddening notes
Tie with silk melody's noose the hands,
Keep shackled the sword and stabled the steed,
And leave men in mocking, impossible lands!

PASTORAL 1941

From bread and wine and the holy sticks
Now comes no peace.
High in the wind the bound bell rocks;
Should binding break, the brazen voice
Yell horror through the hand-sized cottage panes,
And herdsman finger bayonet in the lanes.

The walnut gipsy high on the downs
Stifles his fire,
Stills childrens' voices as the groans
Of dying cities plead in his ear.
There are no seasons now for pipe and drum;
The steel birds never migrate from our dreams.

BALLAD OF THE RANTING LAD

He built him a home, the rascalion lad,
In a turned-up boat on a lonely shore,
And peopled it with a prince's dream,
Was happy in rags if the fire burned clear.

He took him a wife, this bright-eyed boy,
With snowy breast and golden hair,
And they laughed the length of a summer's day
If pear-tree bore and the fish leaped fair.

He got him a boy, young devil-may-care,
To talk to and dangle upon his knee,
And gave him a name and a cloak of wool,
And gospels heard in the words he would say.

Then wild waves broke and broke the home,
And fever came for the golden child.
When grey dawn knocked, in her workhouse shift,
The girl lay stiff as a stone with cold.

But the rollicking boy, the rascalion lad,
Took up his stick, made a fool of his pain,
And walked on the hills with a dream in his sack,
Of a house and a wife and a twittering bairn.

HOMAGE TO A.E.H.

Oh, sigh no more, my lady,
Sweet Spring must come again
To glad the hedge with violet
And bless the bud with rain.

Oh, weep no more, my poppet,
Though hell fall from the skies;
You'll want those golden tresses,
He'll need those sparkling eyes.

For many a man there'll be still,
Oh, many a lusty lad.
Don't let them go a-begging
For what they never had.

The lark must sing his song, love,
If from a splintered wood;
And bayonet's edge grow rusted,
Though rusted in my blood.

So sigh no more, my lady, "
Sweet sleep shall come again
To kiss you in your bed, lass,
With some peace-lucky man.

VENUS FROM THE WAVES

See the dying girl float
In her bed's pale shell.
Stripped of its flowers, her boat
Swings on the intermittent swell.

The weeping world stops
In its plaintive sombre song,
Its tears are crystal drops
Shed for a love gone wrong.

The girl in a vision meets
Love drowned in green furrows, dead . . .
In the foam of the ruffled sheets
Her long hair floats like weed.

From Federico Garcia Lorca.

ELEGY UNENDING

A rose is in the hand,
A tear is in the eye;
You will never understand
Why I must cry.

A wind disturbs the water
And bends the back of tree;
In wind there is a laughter.
But not in me.

My eyes tell me a house
Is empty now and bare;
My ears say not a mouse
Can forage there.

My fingers tell a stone
That bears a graven name;
Oh, body that is bone
Is not the same!

In sleep I hear a song
Whose words I knew before.
They sing it still, along
The tidal shore.

By day I smell the scent
Of Austria's lilac-tree;
I feel its balm is lent
By her to me.

And a rose is in the hand,
A tear is in the eye;
But you'll never understand
Why I must cry.

POEM

What song is sweet
Beside the touch of hand upon the head?
What marble goddess
Half so fair as wife beside my bed?

What word is strong
Beside the thrust of flower through the soil?
What worth the mail
That's set against the isolated soul?

I have known death
March in the mind of smiling-gestured saint;
I have seen love
Choose for his home the harlot-ridden haunt.

Shall song and sword,
Saint, drab and death, draw patterns in the air
To die straightway;
Or shall their warning flare like forest fire?

WEDDING SONG

You shall have roses, my sweet,
And a lantern to frighten the owl,
And a nutmeg tree in the garden,
And pears in a golden bowl.

And I will buy you a bird
With feathers bright as blood,
And a door with lock and key
For our lonely house in the wood.

CONFESSION IN WAR-TIME

Once, long ago, I ran beneath the sun,
Loved his warm hand upon me, kind as fur;
With arms and legs I swung a wide world over,
Brother to men of ice and girls of fire.
Then, words were air, and only hands showed hearts,
And only hearts showed love, or only hate;
Between the two worlds tinkling in my head
There was no place for poetry, no seat
Where I as white-haired shadow of myself
Could sit and count the hours, call to the feet
Of lusty bone and blood that bore my soul
Each minute nearer to perdition's gate.

Now, not so much older, yet so old,
The fire is smothered, and my roaring men
Have whisked away my maidens to a land
Where they can laugh beneath another sun.
This hand, poor prince, that swung a rascal's stave,
Now prideless, begs a favour from the pen;
These eyes, now dull, that once a god's world knew,
Will glitter only in that moment when
They see I still exist upon a page.
My two worlds gone, I tread now like a ghost,
Intangible and featureless, alive
Only as letters crossing in the post.

LEGEND

There was a man
With a coloured coat of rags
Who left his body and blood on a tree.
But the thieves at his side gave the bones to the dogs,
And the black-thorn cock sang merrily.

The lads of the town
Drank down to the dregs
Then took a sharp axe to lop the tree.
But the thieves had been there first gathering logs,
And the black-thorn cock sang steadily.

One day at dawn
Upon their nags
Twelve tinkers came and their hearts were free,
For they cut twelve whistles from the knuckles of the dogs,
To bear the black cock company.

INSCRIPTION ON A BEGGING BOWL

The way a cloak falls
Is majesty;
The way an eye falls
Is modesty;
The way a bird falls
Is destiny;
The way a coin falls
Is charity.

How then when the cloak is flaunted by leper,
And hidden eye is the eye of a whore?
How then when the hawk shall fall for a feather,
Coin pay the reckoning for bloody war?

THE HOUSE

The hollow shell of a house
Is not the body and blood;
The brain, the fire and the flesh
Live not in bones of wood.

The soul is never seen,
Intangible as air;
It is the love of the man
Whose children live there.

THE NEVER-ENDING ROSARY
—A SEQUENCE

INTRODUCTION

I dig this sonnet from a soil of years
Manured by mournful minutes, wet by the rain
Of carefree summers spent by God's salt seas.
The pale boy staring through the dusty pane,
Small finger tracing future on the glass,
Is my small ghost; the very lad who strode
The yawning plains of Europe, round whose fires
Poet and beggar broke a dreamer's bread,
Spinning such webs of magic that their words
Sped in the tree-tops, joyful as quick jays,
Made Christ a comrade, tender of the herds
Out on wind's acre, one of the roaring boys;
And Hamlet, silent at the wood's edge by my side,
Another lad with grey hairs in his head.

I

Slow sarabande of pain in all the air;
Everywhere cadence, decay of a tune, of time,
Death of the gold days and the feathered joy,
And across the purple hills and the purple sky
The long undying rosary of despair.

It has come too soon, this sorrow's psalm,
The dog-faced cloud-rack scowling in the West,
Where brethren moving like uprooted trees
In a Birnam of blood drop aching twigs of hands,
And from leaves in an ancient way stare round about

At callous undulating plains of salt,
Where nightjar leers through a broken note,
And the scarecrow dog at the end of his rope
Gnaws at the door, howls as he feels as we,
The wide immeasurable knowledge of an end.

II

Sharper than ever, the bright beaks of words
Charm my slim finger. In a full-table time
Even the sockets of my head sprout words
That scream and whimper through my dreams like birds
Lost in a desert, or, as the mandrake calls,
A purple rhetoric among the midnight stones.

As flood upon the drum inside my head
Knocks with a ghostly hammer, so my heart,
Mistress of ice and heat, strings out a song
Of words and more than words, that baffle tongue,
And the red wine course after thought and thinker
Through lanes that bind my sword-hand to my sword.

In this winter it is the frozen word
That groans upon my doorstep; as Spring buds,
The word whose nest of gold hangs in the sticks;
The tale that kindles in the hyacinth,
Sweeter than civet in a lady's bower, is word,
And word that wrinkles as the red leaf falls.

The bones of words long dead ride on the wind
That sweeps my searching eyes along the years
From blackness into blackness, till like the bird
Our fathers guessed, the word of truth, in light
Stands bare for one brief footfall—then is gone,
And wind blows where he listeth through the tombs.

III

From that hard minute when the tortured womb
Dropped me, the wailer, in a stone-faced world,
My double-crossing soul has worn two masks;
One hides the singer, his shy foot in the tomb,
While summer poems to the stars he whirls;
One, the hard-handed, keeper of the home,
Hater of blue-eyed darling and the frilled
Fancies of the boy who takes no risks.

‘Love and let thrive,’ says one, ‘the bearded word
Wait on the marring morrow for its answer;
Let me sing softly,’ says this lad of love,
‘Stroking the minutes, precious in my palm,
Winding my wishes round me when the wind’s hard.
I’ll move from danger like a supple dancer,
My feet familiar with the flowers they cleave,
And in the coloured caverns build my home.’

‘What whirlpool’s in the skull that with my hand
I dare not halt? What passion could not purge?
I tower above the pigmy centuries,
Blow the years down and chuckle at their crash,’
Says other, laughing through the tired land.
‘What songs might I declaim for horny age,
Who know not size of pain, or where fear is?
Duty alone is death and foreign to my wish.’

Which shall be mine, worn as my daily face,
When penny’s itch and duty’s pen have etched
Their laws upon me? Which my safe epitaph?
Will either swing a sword and dry my fears?
Bosom, hold both! that both the boys I hatched
Bend a blind ear to Satan as he roars;
So shall my devil from his rock be dashed,
Death fall face downwards, riddled by one truth.

IV

What coiner carved his mark upon my heart
Before the womb forsook me, flung me to fate?
These hands that feel the future, whose are they?
Some monster strung my veins in lover's knot
And wrapped my eyes with words his father wrought
But never taught me. Whose this mad mummery?

'Who is this mocker, my maker,' I ask, 'my friend?'
Not God, whose bread explodes inside my mouth?
Pied-piper madness this benefactor loves,
Whose words of peace ignite within my hand
As I offer his leaden pence for food; his truth
Fickle as breeze-twitched boughs about the eaves;

Not Time that paints his dearth upon the bough,
For death upon the rose is my death too,
Rings my heart's bells and drinks my babbling blood,
And over the salt seas blows my frail fever. Though
Tongueless, my fingers' voice attack this foe
The nagging winds, his henchmen, waste my word.

When Death has pressed his image in my face
There can be no more doubt, no more despair;
And love and loss, soft in a bed together,
Talk me a dirge meet for my fruitless age,
Laugh at my corpse, who on its broken bier
Wide-eyed with terror waits this forgotten father.

The will that keeps me fettered in the world
 Is not my own. Mine is no lackey-love
 For spindle-shanks, and, listening to the old,
 I save my breath to snigger up my sleeve
 At Sunday-face with bibles in his voice
 Who, gospel-gargling, treads upon the rose.

A candle shows me where the sword has bred
 The lightless eye, the dead bird on the bough,
 And ravening counties eating flesh for bread:
 Lift up those boards and you will find below
 A bullet-riddled prayer-book on whose leaves
 Another decade's rats have writ their loves!

World's womb, unchilded, shelters in its rooms
 A treeless country and a crippled god,
 And southern suns, never more near than dreams,
 Slide like a tipsy wench across the globe.
 I could have saved them, but they burnt my heart,
 And wrapped their ears with riddles while I roared.

God, that the mole should dig and threadbare wolves
 Howl round the vineyards at a hungrier foe!
 What is the reason that the rain should fail,
 That fruit should fall, and fish rot in the sea?
 To me it is divine incompetence
 That shall go loveless if we love our sons.

VI

I have seen Winter's pale hand halt on the bud
With the charm of a saint, and a serpent's wile,
And the cow-patched path a-swarm with folk
Whose garnished caps in festival
Flew between eyes and the broken byre
And the dank straw mouldering from the roof.

I have watched, as I walked, in the boy's hard hand
The fractured bird, the fruitless egg:
In the innocent eye, the oaken step,
And the dewdrop diamonds in his hair,
Heart has discerned the disease of youth,
Wild screams from the stairs in a lonely house.

These things are known as a knot is tied,
As a pitcher breaks they are forgot;
So the merry huntsman, red in the woods,
Draws not his rein as the hare's heart breaks,
But rides with a song to his father's gate,
There to be gay with death's next guest.

VII

I have known Winter in a time of tears
Walk through the land with burning eyes
To lay men low. In Spring, on rack of words,
Gold hearts have twisted, all because a wind
Has with a ruffian-hand bid blood be high,
And swing his bully shoulders in a crowd.

I have known Summer tell another tale
Than Summer in the song and dance has told;
How in the fields, under a feathered sky,
Young hand has slackened and the eye seen shapes
That haunt the mother-season in a land
Sick to the heart with words, with words of brass.

Only in Autumn, only before the knock
Of bone upon the sheltering oak is heard,
Shall the still peace of suffering be known:
Only in Autumn, when rash blood be let
And garden-spirals show the end of lust,
Smiles tired heart and hearthside words fly free.

VIII

When Spring's caress and when the winds of love
Undo the dog that whines within my blood
And canker in my heart withdraws his siege,
Masters, my hands hew patterns in the airs,
Weave pick-lock magic, open up the grave!
Power more than Moses struck for rocks my head,
Masking my mewler with a wizard face
Whose maledictions flicker, bright as stars.

What body's sin has severed I can knit
In that mad moment: what the heart desires
These hands can hold, hold healing of the pain
That rocks a monarch on his painted throne.
These feeble hands set fallen mountains up,
This little finger flicks out forest fires.
I am the man my father envied men,
Whose lucky soul lives lecherous as the wren!

What man has done and lived to tell the world
I'll do again. I'll dare the dragon's wrath,
And in the company of angels bawl the word
That baffles oracles, makes dead bones ring,
And palm the celestial ace in Jahweh's fold.
Or let the tiger-smiling, suave boy of truth,
Track my heart down, my wanderer in the wood,
Twitch the bent stick and put an end to song.

Yet time shall be, noiseless as sea-shell sounds,
When death shall knock me cold and my last word
Wail like a little ghost about the parks;
When tiny shapes with flowers in their eyes
And sick-room voices, weeping from their wounds,
Move slow as centuries about my bed.
Then what my gain, if scorpion-terrors lurk
To tear my Hamlet-heart out on the rose?

IX

Between the female sticks I tasted hell
Garnished with flowers: under its mask the skull
Mocked my poor flesh's labour, foisted the lilt
Of lust upon me, led me a dance and laughed
At body's fever. Dour death in bone
Bent my frail twig, turned song to stone.

The King, my father, wrought me sunlight songs,
Meet for the golden board, the blood-red wine:
The Queen, men's mistress, mastered me in wrongs,
Then plucked my eyes to feed her noble swine,
Shot me the hawk who took my message,
Left me a cell, a dungeon dotage:

Built in a breath, the magic of the morning,
Killed at a glance, the beauty of the night:
(Nothing is sacred when I tell its story,
And flowers rot where flowers grew in my heart)
Call high, call low, the ghost you'll find
The day you can surprise the wind.

Heart-high the callow hangman swings my fears,
The scarecrow deeds that shudder in the light,
He knows my price (a ducat buys my tears),
He knows my fate—love in the dog-days bought,
Holds me for less than gutter-nurtured creature
Who does deny his blood, his very nature.

And who denies him? Darnel, dock and rue
The only chorus when he runs me through.
(Heaven's outcast, clasping the dark ducat in his claw!
The twisted emblem of age is in me now!)
Let the play follow, the arrased rat play high,
If it go well, then I will name a comedy!

X

After a little while all grief lies dead,
 And hands and madness in the eyes are still;
 Worn heart awakes to find all tears are shed,
 To shout a new song as feet climb other hill.
 So they can rant, who can no longer feel,
 Though Death with scissors nicks them like a fool.

I was the lad caught thunder in his cap,
 And taught the hawk to carve his name on clouds,
 Ragged the dumb oracle and drained the cup
 Of sorrow for a wager; he whose needs
 Were those alone that motivate the birds
 To ride wild winds or rest content in woods.

But after faith and fame the gale blew round,
 Back to its caverned home, and left him loose.
 Then leaden words fell thud upon the ground,
 Buying no tithe of truth, but only tears,
 Bringing no candle to light him to his board
 And bed, only Death's chopper to chop off his head:

Which had been there for him straight from pistol's crack
 To croak of doom, from lilting cradle-rock
 To the last strand of hemp that breaks his neck,
 God's gift (whose presents must be given back)
 To this soft dreamer, who, banquets in his soul,
 Stumbles from Heaven with a ticket for the dole:

Whose words, like young unbedded virgins wail
 About Love's temple, or in the midnight bed
 Rap on his heart as blindly as the mole.
 But they can knock till hand and heart are dead.
 The corpse they crave is still as cold as stone,
 And no flame flickers where there's only bone!

XI

This minute had been centuries on the way,
And centuries had ground my granite smooth;
Walls had grown high about my eyes, my ears,
But I had looked to love to fling these down.
Yes, the long years had nightly promised flowers,
Preached me a paradise, syrups in my mind.

But cloak hid sword and clock the swing of youth,
Flower sheltered adder, under stones a sting
Lurked, dreaming unwary feet: my feet, my heart,
Urchin though ancient, cozener, were fleeced;
And wind's voice, sack of orts, my centuries' dower,
Blown seed, was sea-thrown, rotten to the tongue.

The brittle world broke round me as I shrank,
Less-love and lack-pence, waiting for the blow;
Now ran the raping winter at my heels,
Promised before my cradle clutched its lord;
My making, my undoing, were not mine
But lay in the hands of angels, hands like claws.

So I lie shamed, discovered in a night
As dark as death, deeper than history;
Mocked from the flower's bell, scorned by the worm,
That pock-patched bitter brother whose is right
To shelter in my shroud, my final friend;
Thus taste I glory, friends, banquet on bones.

See-saw, my ticking heart will last to-day,
But the next and the next will be a reign of tears;
Some hill may own me once before the rats
Break through my box and forage for my hopes.
But hope has gone, and heaven's voice is thin;
Now only scarecrow deaf can know the dumb.

XII

If then a star should fall and singe my shroud
So that the gold-lipped legates of my god
Hold before horror fingers cruciform,
To purge the liliated pools where goddesses
And none but milk-white, sweet my pure-in-heart,
Had in delight bequeathed reflection:

If in my March-hare, turncoat breast
The elfin, festering barb of doubt should prick
Quick and cry halt! to fingers' templar-trade—
So should the promise slip from paradise,
Let lie along the lane my carrion hopes,
And the thin children of decay crouch in the hearth.

But, lest my lord should see me in such ruin,
Mountains should crumble, caverns pock the plains,
Strict columns rattle on the parchment fields
Like play-day drumsticks on a heaven of tin;
And like a looting angel's rod of fire,
Proud poplars prick the slow sun from the sky.

XIII

In heart's cracked bowl lie pence, that by my dream's
Slick counterfeit are coined, spun from the air
Like fabulous cloth-of-gold, prophet's cast clout
Upon the patient fool who waits below,
Spendthrift of molten minutes ere the Lord
Shall call him close to whisper in his ear;
The wastrel watcher of the weasel's craft,
Delicate instrument upon whose page will be
Forever stamped the poor daft coney's testament.

If at this bowl's rim flutes of other times
With salt-eyed melody and guilt despair
Make sharp assault, or red with ancient fire
The rage that burnt my fate upon my brow,
Crack the frail platter on whose side is scored
My history, shall faith fly out as fear?
Or may it be that, from the garden-croft
Another bright boy wrote of, blackbird's plea
Will soften even Satan's merriment?

Sometimes my finger, itching in the flames
Trull-tongue has kindled, knots for me a snare,
Or points me to the crowd like any liar;
Sometimes these eyes in riding high and low
Tease me with paradise as hawk plays bird.
Inner and outer tread the road to war,
And all Atlantis' sands left me to sift . . .
If laughter shake me from salvation's knee
Who shall be judge upon the harm I meant?

I only know the faggot of my flames
Is this same limb my father bade me bear;
This name that tumbles like a sodden lout
Out of the world's prim mouth shall come and go
Whatever weather fall, be frost so hard
That angler, patient at the future's weir,
Pluck it like feckless trout, stiff as a gift
Where given-to and giver smell the lie
That lurks unbidden underneath the scent.

XIV

Invention is the spirit's sharpest pain,
A midnight lamentation in the cell
Bled white with lack of saying. Quick as a fungus
In the crevice of the soul, stirs thought
That knows no word, no sunlight on the world,
And, like the silken-veined dove, about
The iron door of meaning breaks its pride.

Like rotting seas, with Moloch's harvest home
Writhing away to farthest journey of the eye,
Almost to end of limit-line of life,
The poems, that forever in my womb
Must suck their banquet only from my dreams,
Cry like a breastless babe in some strange house,
Forgotten, at the end of no-man's road.

So, think you not, when in a time of iron
My hand arises like a liliated saint
And begs the means from warder-world to carve
For future's dalliance, in a freckled stone,
These agonies of heart, sharp knives of tune—
So think you not assassin other hand
Which leaps like flame and plucks heart's twanging cord;

Which had been best done, as it was to be,
Before the sire had crept plague-blooded to
His purple palace of delight; before
Cell's curt invention to the winter light
Thrust out for all the grinning globe to see,
An alabaster angel, frail with truth,
Whose body be invention's battlefield.

XV

Slow sarabande of pain in all the air;
Everywhere cadence, decay of a tune, of time,
Death of the gold days and the feathered joy,
And across the purple sky and the purple hills
The long undying pattern of despair.

It has come too soon, this sorrow's psalm,
And the black cloud-rack scowling in the West,
Where brethren moving like uprooted trees
In a Birnam of blood drop aching twigs of hands,
And from leaves in an ancient way stare round about

At callous, undulating plains of salt,
Where nightjar leers through a broken note,
And the scarecrow dog at the end of his rope
Gnaws at the door, howls as he feels as we,
The wide, immeasurable knowledge of an end.

TOWARDS A PERSONAL ARMAGEDDON
—A SEQUENCE

I

The shapes of Truth are no man's history
 Or hope; born in the horny womb of Time,
 They die with the daylight, ere the Surgeon's hand
 Can grasp the knife to solve the mystery
 Of feeling and the half-formed word. Sand
 Trickles slyly through the palm like this,
 Playing the hour-glass with the living bone,
 Wife to the midnight sigh, the foetal wish.

The tired poet in his reeling room
 Twists thoughts to clothe his bare hypnotic words;
 Distracted by the rain on sodden thatch,
 He moves towards the window, lifts the latch,
 Cries, crazed by some bloody incubus of doom,
 'Oh, listen to the laughter of the birds!'

II

All life came to me in the bed of love.
 I, blushing puppet, shaped in rose's mould,
 Whose eyes rode southern airs, whose lips
 Lipped the leaves' song and flailed the world with words.
 From inch to acre is the eagles' vision,
 Who clasp the tawny counties in a claw;
 From now to ever is a hail of years,
 Slow snail's the master and the stammering crows!
 But in my passion lives of all I lived
 And spoke their voices for a thousand years.
 West-wind, my brother, took me by the hand
 And showed me over hells my other homes;
 So nightly, under sodden thatch I lay
 And times before the tomb I heard my ends.

III

Before my tales began, before the light
Burst like a devil's howl behind my lids,
Words flickered in my skull and tied my tongue;
Twisting my garment's hem to gain a blessing,
Turning the words of love to gain a home,
I was the lad of sin whose heart bled tears.
Whose fickle pulse beat out all bodies' message?
And who but I had heard the weasel's woe?
Who told the tick of tide in petals' fall,
Knew how a world of years rides in a wind?
(That was a black beginning.) In my brain
The future's noisy crotchet scratched a niche,
Twisted my sombre soul in arabesque.
This was the fanfare to my fair-ground fate.

IV

Like a deft lecher, laughing in his hand,
Or flaming like gigantic stalactite,
I burst the web that kept me in the thighs,
Scattering my bloody pearls across the land.
Stars shook as my silver scream shore high
Into their hearts, and heaved a sigh that I
Should in that midnight minute shout
A song that other ears and other stars
Find but the birthing-ballad of a boy,
The baby-babble as the tooth breaks through.
From that dark minute I have felt my future
Stalk through the land and scythe the hours through,
While in the warm womb's cavern even,
I saw my hearse, felt the rough prick of shroud.

V

My tale of horror was the dry-dugged virgin,
 The eyeless child with flowers in his claw.
 My land of terror was the treeless country,
 Whose warping womb held nothing but my fear,
 Whose stone songs died before the mourning light.
 These were my tale, my land, and these my tears.
 If they had taught me ways and wiles of winds,
 The fever of the cracked bone in the thigh,
 I should have known the worst, and these dead days
 Would not have dragged me like a dog to die,
 Here in a land where no hand holds a greeting,
 Where the slack jaw only the death-day mouths;
 I could have known and could have swung my heart
 To the place where lips labour alone with laughter.

VI

The wry world sucked me, gave me for a home
 A leper's chancel; following the lion
 I knew what banquets slept within a stone,
 How that the cautious raven for his sins
 Must pluck from lime-dry planets sustenance
 And smile when gay-garbed adder milks the moon.
 From this rock I chipped a short-life's grace
 And flaked the minutes in my palm like rime,
 Tasting them before they fell to dust.
 Yet came the dawn when jackal-coat I sloughed
 And, compound with treachery, I moved with snake;
 Two-wise I stepped, deceiving as I dealt,
 Learning to live on lies and love the pit;
 Was this the start, or page before the end?

VII

Then slew I brother with a knife of words.
His body fell, and failing breathed the Spring.
Tree's hand and heart's side would have kept him warm,
But for the beggar in his blood that crowed,
Waking my pilgrim from his forest dream.
Alas, masters, who shall paint the corse
To make it feast-ways ready for my bride?
Who hold the chalice, lest the coursing stream
Should nourish ants who'd grow and rend my box,
Should teach the hawk my message through his tongue
And bring upon me terror as I slept?
The deed is dun: my hand's too weak for jet,
Justice would give me syrops for my brows,
Where others brandish thorn-crowns on a hill.

VIII

I took a man with eyes of pain, whose pearls
Pranking the rubble robbed me of my sleep:
I loved a man with a dagger of lath, lithe,
Lissom and lying, cut-purse with poet's tongue.
And these two-hearted chuckled at my ruin,
Crack-wit they called me, whispering to the trees.
But on the morrow, and the morrow's mother, I,
With gloves of silk and eagle's feathers fraught,
Crossed paths and sticks and let the black pool run
For one; for other, Jack the man of string
Did me a duty, then my fellow-trees
Braced bone and with their knotted muscle sank
A rope for dangling dalliers in the breeze.
Sap throve on bleeding, I on the living gold.

IX

Yet move they many, all their words are false,
And though their tongues swing sweetly southern airs,
The man they carve their image on is lost.
Stab one, swing one, drop one in the ditch,
Stitch ten for fishes in the miser's bag;
Rack one, crack one, bury deep in lime,
Yet rising sun shall see them, ten on ten,
Knocking the old note out of sea-shore shells,
Cozening the old man ready for the hearse,
Alive, loved and moving, many in their lies,
While I, time-master, lord of gallow-tree,
Shall watch them speechless, dancing as they go,
Shaking the rooftree, dropping blight on bough:
And mountains toppling from their velvet feet.

X

'Come night and come the sliding of the stars:
Come Angelus and sway the swinging teat,
That planets, suckled like a hungry stone
In henpecked heaven, scatter complaints abroad.
Colour me, lanterns, with a gibbet-dye
That tongue and eye out of my lantern skull
Shall chase the body-tasters from the globe,
And leave the mountain-summit free for love.'
This, in my mystic missal, wrote a saint,
Washing the sword and nail-prints in his side,
Watching the faded ages in his hair:
It was so long ago when I heard this;
The seeds I spat while walking in the fields
Now flourish figs and tempt my poacher-lips.

XI

A sack of weasels from the land of graves
Unwinds my wishes, strews abroad my hope.
And in the moonlight out upon the plains
A mole-dance stammers words from unboxed bones
That chill my ears and spike my habits through.
For peace I pack my eye, my altar change,
And sew nine stitches where was once a stake;
For love I lash flame nine-pins to my breast
And finger-way break minutes as they bud.
But it is useless: for along the lanes
The briar-claws clutch, the adder's nests lie low,
And it is only seconds till the sword
Shall nail me palmwards up against the oak.
(All which was writ me in a dream of rats.)

XII

There is a hill and over that a cross
Swung in a cloud, and over that a star.
There is a man, and over him a sword
Swung in a hand, and over that a god.
Who pays the piper if he is a demon?
Who calls the tune, if Michael rips it out
From gold-strings at heaven-gate when earth below is
black
With ant-plague and penny itch and fever in the heart?
There is a mountain crawling as we sing,
Whose woods clothe giants' navels as we love.
And who shall bar the door against its day,
And who shall cut the bough and bow the churl?
Don't guess, don't labour for the word that's sped:
Don't lie awake, don't love, don't speak your name.

XIII

A dog coughs; who then shall doubt a wolf?
If clouds weep thistles, shall the bomber's egg
Bore, burrow its mole-hole in the coffin-wall?
Long have I watched the madness in my hand
And long felt terror chipping in my bone;
But I would hack this half-heart from its stalk,
Crush between mill-stones these my milksop struts
If finger's voice stroked mercy out of steel
Or visiting the hills I found I ran.
A wolf sings and who would smell a rat,
If ducat's devil had him, in the walls?
No, flags dance, and coloured altars rise
To praise the Spring that gives us ears to hear,
Hands to hold the weather, fledgling to feed.

XIV

A snake in thatch can spell the end of dreams,
Spill sun, the desert's cousin, out of doors
And drum the twitching hours from my wrist.
But snake in man spells not nor dreams a sun,
Spoils the bright flower and lets the red blood run,
Cozens the lock and knows all stars are free.
So of the two, the twin-legged and the none-,
Which shall we follow, festoon with our fears?
And which the one nail twisting to the barn
To brother weasel? Once in my life a dwarf
Lurched from an oak and rapiered a god,
Smiling, mouse-footed, with an arm of stone,
Then turned, curtsied to our smiles and tears,
Vanished between the rafters and the thatch.

XV

These many-storied pence will etch my dream
In pink-rock caverns underneath the moon;
Where, safe from the Age's rack, I'll spin a doom
For every stick that stabbed my wishes. Fame,
Fearful and frenzy-footed now my sable hand
Clasps hard and strangles earldoms in a trice,
Shall with a female gesture offer gold,
Toss with a downward glance the Indies' sack
And prayer of grasping. Yet I shall stand aloof,
Alone, building with words and winds a turret
Which my black book and block shall furnish quite;
Whose doors, deaf to the gold-edged pauper's paw,
Shall give no message of the man who waits,
Shall open suddenly without a sign.

XVI

For it was told me in a dream I heard,
When the ice-night blew windwise through my head
And taught my linnet-loves to rest in stones:
That night I saw an eagle twist a wheel,
Saw my own numbered name flash through a fire,
Heard my blood whisper that a time had trod
His passage round the stars and now had come;
Waiting, was tickling my heart-door with his scythe,
Counting his fretful hours till my hand knocked
Away the bolts to let him walk within.
So he stands here, grows old inside my veins.
Smaller than crags now, weaker than young lions,
His home became a place of hissing, leopard's fair,
I, masters, shelter, yet am his Master-grave!

XVII

The dancing man with the dagger of lath
Slashes the bubbles growing out of grief,
And drops the leaden hours through the loam.
He is the rainmaker, son of the fatal plight;
But the stumbling woman dressed in straw
Strews thorns, and scythes the merry moment's corn:
Her womb drops woe before her limbs have lived,
And her to-morrow died before the dawn.
Yet of the two, the lathman and the sheaf,
I'd give my ring where sorrow rings the clock.
We who are merely planets' tennis balls
Hold fast to tinsel, letting diamonds drop
Like damsel plums, into the poacher's hand,
And never read the world till we are blind.

XVIII

The bubble-word is nectar to the dumb,
And ghosts have wept at trifles over Thebes,
Where between sackcloth's lips and water's whip
Old men have spoke the deathbed of an Age.
Likewise the deaf have shuddered at the word
Wailed by a suckling scarcely dry from womb;
And scholars turned uneasy pages as
Crows croaking cross the silent pane.
What is the shape of truth? I ask. Are words
Coined in the catchpenny midnight, armour plate,
Bourn from the mourning moan, the morn
Of madness, when the roving eye feels rooms
And finds an empty house, his side-man stone?
Will words heal wounds that sharpen heartslike knives?

XIX

When yellow spots do on your hands appear
Think twice, thank God, but do not hope to act.
For midnight daggers rust in morning dew,
And sunlight on a wound will breed a fruit.
Wait, watch how the cypress dances for the moon,
The fluid geometry of bats, the black mole's trade,
And you will know how much a limb is worth,
How much St. Francis gathered in his cap:
And you will know what song the beetle sings,
And how the straw-built prophet comes to hell.
A white horse proudly walked along a hill,
Bearing an eagle, who with bloody claw,
Tore out its entrails just before the wall;
I saw the horse blaze banners from his eye.

XX

'Tis not the painted stick, the golden boy,
The figure cut in alabaster pays
Me for the bearing burden of a name:
These baubles sat my eyes like shiftless wench,
Heated my loin, but left it cold as stone,
And no love lost, and no love to be gained.
Twelve-tongued the Bell Hosannah paints a grave,
One-piped the devil-kestrel Eden wings:
And I am here in matter without mould,
Manwise to walk where walking brings no home,
Where homes can hold no hearts a moment's space,
Where walls hold mirrors which alone hold walls.
If there's a hill worth climbing, tell me, boy,
What's on the other side, mountains or plains?

What hand of stone has stabbed my hope,
 And writ my fate upon a talking dial?
 Was it the same forking limb that hacked a cross
 Out of a pasture-hill and hanged a saint?
 The same that, giving birds a tale of heaven,
 Could fill the space behind the lids with lies,
 And throng with devils hour's careless word?
 If it is so, the friend who keeps my side
 Is he not apt to cause a wound of words,
 Much more of iron, where I am most weak?
 The sea that tells an endless tale of peace,
 On whose broad breast the peaceful packet walks,
 Might it not suddenly become a fiend,
 Crush sleeping centuries, rock with joy at wreck?

XXII

How shall we man this mountain when it rocks,
 Only by lying wait and trapping clouds?
 If, as the tucket sounds, the winking winds
 Would join us, we might be safe: but, no.
 Young men, with terror from the lap of love,
 Leap! Know in that minute the vice-locked bone,
 The twining veins that stammer out their tale
 Before the fleeing blood cuts off their dole.
 Know that the word, the southern sound, is false,
 That truth's in tendons and the sobbing heart.
 For me, there'll wailing be among the elms,
 And there will dirges sing about the barns.
 Pie-fingering thumb pulled out my waited prize,
 Gave me a grave to tend, an empty home.

XXIII

Though cities fall we cannot hold the hour
When dream-built phoenix sheltered in the leaves,
And the proud pilgrim with his marble thighs
Strode through the forest years before our birth.
It is another tale, made before sound
Prompted the patriarch behind the eyes,
While the weak globe, uncertain of his goal
Still swung in space, in matter without mould.
Yet song was there, growing through the lids,
Gradual, child-footed, wanting but the grave
To snap the leash and cast it into light.
Now cries the blood and the plucked bone cries,
And only the heart lies still as nerveless hands
Scatter the perfect years, the perfect years.

XXIV

Not drum, nor trembling tucket-sound shall stay
The falling hammer, the forgotten word;
The halting foot be fast upon the shift
And lock of laughing sand as on this rock,
Racked with the Age's weevils, pulled in parts
By a straw-haired Nemesis whose babbling blood
Scoffs in man's head and turns his heart to flint.
This is no moment for the lover's word,
When cracked-bone terror and the lurking barb
Lie in the flower's bell nor show their eyes:
O hands, O heart, how many centuries
Must we be stifled in this stony grave?
How many bloody minutes roll across
The land, before the love we bear is born?

Which is the final shape, then, which the sharp
Edge to cut from history its coat of brass
And bear unto the forty winds a sign?
Which of these voices leans on silver tongue,
Learning a weapon that will dull the sword,
And blazing stalactite reduce to dust?
Which fling my devil down and let me sleep?
Patience, my masters, while the children weep
Their unborn bodies' blood for my poor beast,
Whose shackles falter in his wordy ruin,
Whose worlds are nothing more than angels sing
From coloured pages, unbelieved, unheard
Of men. Patience again, I ask you, lest
In carving we may cut the throat of hope.

THE BOAT RETURNS

THE BOAT RETURNS

The boat had drifted, battered, to the beach
That rings my heart's deep sea, crusted with grief,
Decked as for festival with tropic flower,
A slim green lizard grinning at the prow.

What pain has spoken prophecy aboard
You, gushing from the hatch? Oh, what black sun
Has blistered your gold sides to make gold mouths?
To cry, 'O whither now, wild waves, O where?'

I saw this boat against the summer moon:
I caught her music in my summer ear:
I felt her tackle pulling in my breast:
Her prow against my heart-bone making way.

Then blood spun skywards like the frantic lark,
Speaking a language tongue had never known;
Singing an ancient song, forgotten when
Twelve sturdy Greeks pulled out to sea from Tyre.

Oh, Mistress Mine, oh, Traveller! What land
Is poorer for your leaving? What the tale
Your lips, if lips they are that crack your sides,
Could tell, in sighs between the shiftings of the tides?

And while heart spoke a circling gull called, 'Speak!'
'Speak!' croaked the raven from the ruined wharf.
'Oh, tell your tale!' the grim crab cackled. And
A thousand creatures from the sea sighed, 'Tell!'

'Long time ago, a time too proud for years,
Too great with grief to bear a century's name,
I trod, a virgin, on the sea's soft breast,
Full in my pride and stepping like a queen.

'Born in the misty heaven between the sun
And the far poles of suffering and delight,
Fashioned by tearful hands whose eyes sang praise,
I walked the earth's small floor on holiday. . . .

'With deck awash, and foundering under fruits,
I heard the hammer fall and saw men fall
Beneath the lash, agape with leather throats,
So that Rome's tables be complete with lime!

'I carried a pale prophet, safe in chains,
Whose crime was that inside his wagging head
A story would not cry itself to sleep—
A yarn about a madman and two thieves.

'And after time unmeasured I beheld
Tall cliffs, a hoped-for haven, white with chalk;
But rest was only iron in the heart,
And conqueror burning blue-limbed men in woods.

'From my tall tree, the pale-eyed wanderers saw
Dark men in feathers, happy under heaven,
And left them when they sailed again, plucked crows,
Black stinking bundles rolling on the shores.

'It was all waste, or woe, or blood upon my decks;
Young lovers parted by a salty dream;
Husband from wife and warm fire dragged away,
To cough inside my hold among the ice:

'Man torn from mother, father from his son,
To watch with blackening eyes the Southern Cross;
Or wait with thickening tongue while wars were won,
And dripping life, to singe King Philip's beard.

'So many years! Oh, how the time has dragged!
And not an inch of ocean not my own;

No sight unknown, from Dutchman at the Cape
To green Sargasso's serpents and their stench!

'So many years! So many brave bones bleached!
So many tears to swell the salt sea's dower!
And so much blood; ah, so much useless blood,
That might have relearned love, discovered God!'

But was there not a time, I whispered, when
With proud, knife-fingered boy upon your prow,
You won again your maidenhead and stepped,
Lissom as linnet through a poet's dream?

When winds brought not the message of decay,
And decks were dressed with diamond-flashing song?
When the great snowy albatross beat time,
Close in your wake, to poet's golden rhyme?

Have I not heard that as the moon sank low
Beneath the tides, strange creatures from below
Crept up your sides, and panted on your boards
To hear the magic leave the dark boy's lips?

'We danced through latitudes no chart has dreamed,
In bays reported by no map we stayed;
It seemed we sailed another globe, as though
Like thieves we crept away while men still slept.

'With this young god as steersman, many sights
I saw. I watched bergs born, heard mother's scream
As silver-blue babe toppled from the womb,
Moving the waters even to the Poles.

'I heard the many-coloured birds that speak
The language that created men from slime;

And watched the torpid serpents dreaming worlds
No eyes would see, among the rotting trees.

‘Had we been mates, he boat or I a bride,
Time would have stayed for us, our legend kind.
But sap had dried within me, blood in him.
And so the morning broke when, in my sight

‘The shores he had invented groaned and wept,
Heaved with a death-bed sickness, slowly shrank,
A damp, amorphous, sickening heap of filth,
Stinking to heaven, washed by a putrid sea.

‘And from that minute, he whose hand had led
Leaned on my mast and let the tiller swing;
His peace polluted and his gods unmanned,
He watched the obscene seas with eyeless holes.

‘Speaking no word, his tongue cracked like dry straw;
Thinking no thought, his brain like dew dissolved;
Dreaming no dream, his heart became a stone. . . .
And so my captain leaned against my mast.

‘Then one night while I slept beneath the lee
Of a shadow that had come before the moon,
A tempest rose from all the dead men’s throats,
Who pined for home, chill on the ocean’s floor.

‘I woke in anguish from my desert-dream
And heard the thunder crackling in my hold;
All emptiness I felt, no one to love.
And by the dawn I found my love had gone.

‘And in his place an ancient thing I found,
Gaunt as the love that madness bears for peace,
Deaf, blind and helpless, lying on my decks,
Waiting for death since this red world began.

‘And as the years wore thin, I learned to hear
The reed-weak whimperings that seemed to crawl,
Faint as a pauper’s joy, from this sad ape,
Words that no ear might trap but nearing death:

*‘I see him trading metal rods for pearls;
Spitting on verses in some sunny town:
I see him trading pearls for women’s limbs;
And burning sonnets as the sun goes down.*

*‘I see him, wild with wine, in narrow streets,
Creating ways of passion for a friend:
I see him, sad and sleepless in a cell,
Weeping that justice cannot slay with fire.*

*‘But, last of all, upon a rusty bed,
Troubled with flies and noises from the docks,
I hear him shrieking as his thick blood turns,
“Where lies she now? Oh, where my lovely bark?”’*

‘I listened softly, stilled the rocking waves
With my broad bosom and my oaken strength;
I waited breathless, like a heated maid
For raping whisper, but no whisper came.

‘And then, in anger with this weary thing,
Impatiently I swung my shoulders, flapped
The tatters of my mast-head, asked again.
But all I heard was shark’s disgusted scream. . . .

‘So now you find me, sheltering in this shore,
Away from tempest and the sad-eyed boy
Whose fingers still reach out across the seas,
Across the blood that’s washed my creaking boards.’

And will you stay? I asked the tired boat,
And bear the sea’s sweet harvest to the world?

And will you stay, I asked, that poets may
Find rest for once upon your hallowed breast?

‘That may not be,’ I thought the words came back,
‘For I am weary and my heart is old. . . .’
The tower-clock spoke night, and as I watched,
The wailing bark sank silently from sight.

